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Ride It Like A Tiger: The Poems Of Daisy Fried '89

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THE POEMS OF DAISY FRIED '89

Daisy Fried '89, *She Didn't Mean to Do It*, University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000

There's a world of inadvertence packed into the title of Daisy Fried's extraordinary book of poems—her first, just published as the 1999 winner of the prestigious Agnes Lynch Starrett Award sponsored by the University of Pittsburgh Press. "Didn't mean to" at once admits and sidesteps guilt: She didn't intend it, it just happened; she's not a bad person, just got carried away; she didn't set out to, was surprised into it—into crime, into sex, into irresponsibility, even, paradoxically, into agency or maturity. On the culpable side of this divide, a woman involved in a racist incident in Fried's extended sequence "Strike" pleads in court that "she didn't mean it"; proud of her own ethnic heritage, she "doesn't stop to think, / none of us do, what it is [she's] proud of." On the more hopeful side, a mother in "Whatever Works" reaches a hand around so that her baby, squalling in the back seat, can suckle her finger "and keeps on driving fast and crooked around that way." "Fast and crooked": the women in these poems don't let circumstance or self-doubt constrain them; they drive dangerously, live on the edge, learn to dance (taught by a pair of pregnant shop girls) in a men's room papered with porn, the images "hairy, staring, brackish, slack, gleam, bluster, glister, blast, bloat, / blossom, blow." So our world's provisional, disquieting, uncomforting: within its urgencies, Fried concludes in "Slaughterhouse Island," "we're all of us new, and scared, and rising."

Fried's poems bear abundant witness to the cruelties, the inanities, the subsidences that we live with, don't ordinarily stop to think about. Here, a house built on fill sinks into its foundations like "a tired man who has worked all his life / sinking to his couch, one hip, shoulder down with it, other hip, shoulder down with it." Here little girls in Turkey weave rugs morning to night: "In weaving, / the hands, which have a thousand angles—bird, mallet, poultice, purse, / signal, letter, clay wad, smoke—are merely pushed by the arms; / the arms are hung upon the back. Sense of balance is required. Little girls have that." Here, one 16-year-old girl stabs another to death: "Oh pity, oh pity guys. / Guys, I cannot breathe, I cannot see the night." Fried's vibrant delivery in these poems—the unexpected metaphor of exhaustion, the catalog of subtle gestures, the slang phrase raised to tragedy—infuses the appalling with poignancy, urges the reader out of numbness into vigorous response.

Daisy Fried has made her living as a journalist since graduating from Swarthmore, and that observational skill is everywhere evident in her accuracy of eye and ear—an accuracy that's unconventional, outrageous, striking. She's caught a film projector's "ticky whir," a sailboat's rig "tackata-tacking," a sprinkler's "switch, switch, swatch, switch," the rhythmic "kshoong, kshoong" of boys on skateboards, the way their hair "whaps, jets." She's caught the impact of elliptical speech: a girl on prom night thinking, "does he? / do I? does my?"; or spatting lovers declaiming, "You Always! You Never!"; or bachelorettes chiding the bride-to-be with, "Eeee, Tereese!" She's caught the shock of action reduced to essence: a flirting girl "showing her teeth to a man"; kids who "two-hand their pistols"; a drunk woman and a cop facing off "like two repelling / magnets"; transit executives who "swing their arms in for crashing corporate / handbone handshakes." Fried's tone whips from jocular—a businessman's "chinks and penetralia"; to creepy—"bad kids play nasty with a rat"; to startling—a maturing daughter "boiling off the mother"; to exquisite—"wisteria / in dusk its same color." Her accumulations—"hairy, staring, brackish"; "bird, mallet, poultice"—amplify a simple premise into stunning significance. These poems go everywhere, see everything, but they're always centered in that fine observing intelligence, even when the speaker is reduced to "my shadow over the face of a sleeping flatnose drunk," or to a revealing "I think" tucked into a complicated description, or to a single "our" taking possession and thus responsibility in a cityscape. She didn't mean to do it? Sure she did.

This book's not for everyone: Its brash sexual slang could sear off your eyebrows. But if you're in love with language, here's my advice: Buy the book, read it, ride it like a tiger.

—Nathalie Anderson
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Steam

City winter night the mother
walks with the daughter. We see
steam wavering, churning
from manholes. City boiling
itself underneath.

We throw our two shadows
on the shining steam plumes;
it makes tunnels, body-shaped,
into thick steam, a way to
see through to the other
side. I think

my mother is turning to steam.
Thinning. The muscles
going off the bones. Daughter
boiling off the mother.